

**My proper source, my past madness.
What do they know that I don't? Defeat?
Victory in it? That people die?**

—*Laura Ulewicz, 1930-2007*

It is my pleasure to re-introduce the poetry and adventuresome life of Laura Ulewicz, a midcentury American poet whose significant, if not often brilliant work, has been mostly disappeared. History was unkind to women of her generation and before it; the intention of this volume is to revive her work and its importance to both her era and its prophetic place in defining issues that continue to occupy contemporary poetry.

A little biography, a little history—1965, in the Gallery Lounge at San Francisco State University for a noontime poetry reading sponsored by the Poetry Center, where Laura Ulewicz is one of the featured readers. A graduate student, I am in a much-divided country that is moving more deeply into the war in Vietnam. Simultaneously, on campus and beyond, the Civil Rights movement is creating a whole series of demonstrations. Black voices and the discussion of race relations are much in the air. Feminism and women's voices and issues will be on the margins until the end of the Sixties. Men still run the show. As I will later learn, the poet before us is a second generation Polish American, a daughter of middle class Detroit autoworkers and union members. Initially her ethnic identity and battles are a central thread in the work:

... I fight because my father's
Called dirty Polack, because my sandwiches
Are made of blackbread. Good thing I fight well.
Here in America, as under God
Where everyone has his equal turn
At dying, everyone has his equal turn
at persecution—except, maybe, the English.

She keeps reading with poems that go in different but related directions; I am struck by the intensity, focus and bravery; the work is riveting:

. . . I lived by silences, by hibernations.
I woke at dawn. At dawn with a shotgun I woke
To watch in morning fog from my porch a tawny
Mountain lion come down in morning fog
To kill my chickens. I chose against those chickens.

The poem sounds as if she had been living in the woods in exile from an urban world, one from which she may have escaped or been banished. Then the poems strike a larger, more expansive note; she has a well-read mind, is an intimate witness connecting driving across the American continent to its literature:

Two boys in black jeans leaned against a log fence
Playing a pocket radio and cursing
Loud to beat the vastness down. A matter
Of will and hot jazz. I said, "It's pretty
Tame here"—being, of course, wrong. I might
Have meant "Too wild with people." And so we climbed,
Until the car should cool, more to escape
Noise than to discover. That seconded
The wrong. Yet, pausing for breath on the ascent,
Carl told me how on his mother's grave,
While drunk, he first made love to another man.
In Concord—where the hills are monumented
With Hawthorne, Melville, Walden Pond, and our first
Revolution for severance—the fought one.
Now we looked eastward across a namelessness . . .
Of hills. For beyond this one was another equal
In size, and beyond it another, until
Our minds, wanting to fix, were trapped in freedom.
Often I dream I open a hundred doors
And behind each door there is only another door.

One might make an association with Kerouac in *On The Road*. The large scope of the poems, from the historical to the social, natural to intimate, the actual sounds of things and people, give the work a real sense of intrigue. But Ulewicz is not rhapsodic. The poem is probing into the limits and emptiness of such geographic freedom.

Who was this Laura Ulewicz? Was she an autodidact? We became off-and-on friends. She never spoke of having gone to college. Who had she read to get to this level of writing? *The Inheritance* (Turret Books, 1967), her first and only small volume of poems, gives one good glimpse of her learning:

Who suckled us then toward womanhood? George Sand?
Did she have breasts? Cassandra, my dear Nastya
Philipovna kept on saying, "I've got no
No time for housework." Elizabeth was busy
Burying her queenly digs—and the wheat
Would keep on swaying. A choir of beatniks kept chanting,
"Be a real woman," while they buried babies in flower
Pots. Joan of Arc turned traitor. Isolde
Always was dying. But de Beauvoir was there. Oh yes,
Anthropology was going on . . .

Not long after the reading, the Poetry Center arranged for me to meet Laura. She lived in a Victorian apartment overlooking Haight Street. In the living room there was one huge amber cat sitting guard by a bay window. Two big leafy potted plants hung down by wires from the ceiling. Gardening and the shapes of growing plants inform several of her poems. It was one of the skills and loves she had brought from her Polish relatives in Detroit. While Laura wandered about to find a folder of her poems, she held a cigarette. I soon came to know that she always smoked, wielding the cigarette between her fingers like a weapon, ready to take on, embrace, consider whatever conversation might proffer in the way of thoughts or evidence. She was no pushover. It was morning. We were being picked up to go give a reading at a high school as part of the Poetry Center's Pegasus Project.

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Both from her and her archives which, as literary executor, I ultimately helped to acquire, I learned more of her history. She arrived in San Francisco around 1950, in her early 20s, definitely on the run from Detroit, and never went home again. Was there child abuse? Her much younger cousin, Dona, whom I would meet after Laura's death, said her father was difficult. But her middle class

home was full of books and a piano. She was clearly bright; the parents wanted her to become a math teacher. She was no doubt rebellious. Arrested for shoplifting what she later told Dona was a “sexy dress,” her parents refused to pay her bail. A friend paid it and she married him; they moved to Chicago where the marriage would not last. It is not really clear what she initially did in San Francisco. Gradually she migrated into a Bohemian life whose center was in North Beach. Refusing to take an office job, she worked in nightclubs as a “camera girl.” She began to write a loose kind of open-ended verse and published in small, local magazines. Attractive, with a thick head of whiskey dark hair and physically strong, people might have wondered if she had just wandered in off the family farm. Indeed, as the poems clarify, her Polish ancestors were peasants.

Gregarious and literary, she became friendly in the local world of poets. Kenneth Rexroth was friendly to her. But the small Beat poetry world was made up primarily of men. With the exceptions of Helen Adam and Joanne Kyger, the circles around Robert Duncan, Robin Blaser, and Jack Spicer were closed. The Beat poet associations of Lawrence Ferlinghetti, Bob Kauffman, Lew Welch, Gary Snyder, Michael McClure, and Philip Whalen were not inclusive either. It was not a sympathetic time for women writers. Rexroth’s gatherings at his home at Scott and Page Streets opened the door a little between her and the men. She was friendly with Allen Ginsberg. Her cousin told me that they once went camping in Washington. Ginsberg’s portrayals of the emigrant Jews, including the nightmares of his mother, may have encouraged Laura to write about her own emigrant Polish family. These were people still not recognized in mainstream America, nor in its literature.

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One evening in 1965, in Detroit, I am getting off a Greyhound Bus. I have taken a break from Peace Corps Training at Michigan State in Kalamazoo. I will arrive in Nigeria in another month. Detroit is an opportunity to come closer to Laura’s roots, including taking in the power of that city for the first time. When I suggest that I might want to go and meet her parents, she laughs and dismisses the question as if it were beyond the pale. I eventually bed down for the

night at a YMCA, but I have to find it first. On the sidewalk just outside the station door, I ask a young, white cop for directions.

“Sure. Follow me.” The street is barely illuminated. I am conscious of walking past Black folks sitting on building stoops. “You see how they get quiet when we walk by?” I don’t answer. In the streetlight, he shows me his billy club. “You see the chips off the wood? I banged some heads real hard.” I am getting nervous. Am I being used as his shield? Most of the last year I have walked in Civil Rights marches.

At the Y I check in with a line of quiet, carefully dressed men and women in suits. The Black Muslims are in town for a convention. On a bulletin board I notice an announcement, and the next evening find myself in a small nearby theater. It is *The Toilet*, a Leroi Jones one-act play. On the edge of violence and explosion, the actors’ voices zing back and forth. I do not see anyone I could identify as Polish American. Two months later, while I am in Nigeria, this area of downtown Detroit goes up in flames. H. Rap Brown would say, “Violence is as American as cherry pie.” The whole country seemed infected by violence, including Laura’s poems, where she introduces:

. . . my own
Real friends. Barbara of the pock-marked
Face who always went swimming nude. The skin
Of her body was smooth. Betty with death in her purse
And a fear of sleep in her mind. She’d pick men up
And struggle no. Dreaming is how she lived;
A hurt family that hurt her
Was what she made. Celia. Camping with Celia
We’d watch how her six-fingered hands shivered.
Twelve minnows in the stream. She’d dip
Her cellophane brassieres and tell us how
Her father had raped her when she was nine. Inge
Wrapped in an apron of religion against
Dachau. Joey who had a mind. The bulldozer
Driver. Lurching, his orange machine invaded
Our camp. How his laughter scattered our nakedness.

The visual detail is extraordinary. Again there is that emotional intensity. We might hear an echo of the work of Sylvia Plath, whom Laura had met when she lived in London.

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In the late Fifties, the love of her life became Jack Gilbert, a poet originally from Pittsburgh. In 1962, his first book, *Views of Jeopardy*, was selected for publication by the prestigious Yale Series of Younger Poets. The book's dedication reads, "To Laura Ulewicz / a kind of dragon." It is no doubt a testimony to the fact that she was nobody's fool, especially in the making of poems. Reading *Views of Jeopardy*, one can sense that Laura was more than a mere combination of lover and muse. It is hard to believe that she and Jack weren't pushing each other to make the best work possible. Their poems share that kind of ambition and intensity.

Eventually, and after much struggle, Jack ended it. Laura was devastated by the circumstances, and no doubt made a little crazy. It is not quite clear why she was hospitalized. In California in those days it was not unusual for a disturbed young adult, absent anything resembling contemporary drug therapies, to find themselves, voluntarily or otherwise, committed into a mental hospital. *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest*, Ken Kesey's 1962 novel, epitomized such incarceration. In fact, it was a period in which many respected American poets were known for their breakdowns and hospital stays. Anne Sexton, Robert Lowell, John Berryman, Theodore Roethke were among them.

I do not know where she was hospitalized, possibly south of San Francisco in Menlo Park, the same place where Kesey had once worked. She never talked to me about it, including her diagnosis. I did learn that she was subjected to shock therapy. Subsequently she escaped and wandered up into the surrounding hills. She found and wrapped her arms around a large, cold stone. She told me it was the frigid chill that cleared her mind and made it possible to wind her way back into the world. She decided to move to Seattle to take a workshop with Stanley Kunitz at the University of Washington. He was replacing Roethke, who'd had his own breakdown.

Ironically, just before leaving California, Laura's work began to receive more public attention. In addition to small local magazines, *Genesis West*, a new and significant journal edited by Gordon Lish, would publish poems by both she and Jack. Word of her work reached Donald Allen, who was editing what would become the pivotal anthology, *New American Poetry 1945–1960*. He invited her to submit poems. As life or luck would have it, she did not do so. "I did not have the time. I was leaving for Seattle the next day," she would later recall. There is no telling what publication in Allen's anthology might have meant for her publishing career. It would not be the last time she and her work missed an opportunity for major recognition.

By leaving California, it was apparent that Laura was getting away from the shadow of Jack Gilbert. Even so, her feelings for Jack seem to have persisted before turning toxic late in her life. That is another conversation. As a new wave of feminism swept and provoked the country in the early Seventies, I once asked Jack what he thought about it. His curious response was that he did not understand it. "I always thought women were superior," he said. When later I became executor of Laura's estate and had possession of her papers, I found many letters to him that were sealed in envelopes but never sent. Out of respect, I could not bring myself to read them. Jack's letters to Laura carry no affection. They are usually a litany of his most recent accomplishments as a poet, his fellowships, teaching gigs and such. In its own way, it is a sad commentary on the way things ended between them.

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The poetry Ulewicz wrote in Seattle with Kunitz put her work on a much more formal path. The archived manuscript for the original poems in *The Inheritance* are flush with accents marked variously across each line. (During that reading at the Poetry Center, under her breath one hand would rise and fall, counting beats.) Some might say Laura's transition to more formal structures was psychological. Making meter central to his work was how Roethke ordered and calmed his inner turbulence. Nonetheless, Laura's work achieved a new formal power, matched with a new confidence. It was a skill set that would follow her while she made

poems traveling in continental Europe, then to London, where she settled in the early Sixties.

Despite her curious reservations about “the English,” while she was still in her early thirties, Laura’s time in London brought her to the height of her literary career. She was welcomed into Edward Lucie-Smith’s “the Group,” a relatively conservative meeting of poets that occasionally included the more innovative Nathaniel Tarn and Anselm Hollo. With the critical support of its members, she wrote most of the poems that became *The Inheritance*, the volume to be published by Turret Books, whose list included Sylvia Plath, Ted Hughes, Robert Creeley, and Louis Zukofsky. She gave public readings, including at least one, possibly more, for the BBC. In 1964 she won the prestigious Guinness Poetry Award. A Penguin editor proposed to include her in an anthology with Denise Levertov and Sylvia Plath. Still in her early thirties, from the point of view of her poetry, things could not have been better.

But there was one big problem. Without any marketable skills, she did not qualify for England’s required work permit. Her visa time in London was up; she had to exit the country. We never talked about what must have been a hard turning away. She soon left for Jamaica with Dennis Marshall, a journalist. She did not seem to lose her momentum. The poems she wrote at this time are animated by observations of a neo-colonial island matrix, while her descriptive eye and sarcasm remain unflinching.

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Eventually Laura decided to return to San Francisco and her old apartment in Haight-Ashbury. It was 1967. The quiet neighborhood she left had been blown apart. It was now a refugee site for disaffected youth from all over the country, and beyond. Without much business experience she opened “I & Thou,” a small coffee shop on Haight Street.

One day I am standing next to Laura inside the door of her shop. Haight Street was, at that time, a circus. The “Summer of Love” was over. A thin line existed between expressions of paranoia and the kids in multicolored batik fashion shirts, secondhand jeans and

jackets. Voices are a mix of beggars' calls for spare change and whispers seeking dope. At a nearby table I can hear two good poets, Bill Anderson and George Stanley, talking about the Huey Newton murder trial in Oakland. Bill, who is Black, is covering it for the *Bay Guardian*. George had been close to Jack Spicer. We are all in the same poetry group—Bill, George, myself, Woody Haut, Larry Felson, Wilbur Wood. Jack Gilbert was also a leading member until he and Linda Gregg, a then-young poet and his partner, left to live in Greece.

That day Laura complains to me and everyone, "All the young come in here asking for free cups of coffee. I tell them to go away. I can't pay taxes, survive and give it away." She looks to the other end of the shop. Pen in hand, Michael McClure sits with a small open notebook. Closeby sits a young man whose head has been heavily bandaged: "That's the guy who jumped off the Golden Gate Bridge and survived. And there is McClure." With her characteristic sarcasm and charm, she adds, "You can bet he is making the guy into a character for a new one-act."

In the midst of managing her shop, Laura continued a life that in many ways paralleled her literary life in London. A few blocks down, on Divisadero Street, at radio station KQED, she would host a regular series of readings. For her own work she joined a poetry group without Gilbert. Its international membership was led by Lawrence Fixell and included Edoard Roditi, Ed Mycue, William Dickey, Mark and Frances Linenthal, Shirley Kauffman, and Nanos Valoritis.

In 1968 she received a National Endowment for the Arts Creative Writing Fellowship. Not long before, however, she received what must have been a devastating letter from the Penguin editor who had wanted to publish her work. The marketing department had decided that there would not be enough sales to justify an anthology of women poets. In retrospect, it is astonishing, given that the publisher rejected Plath and Levertov on the same grounds. It was the second time Ulewicz had lost out on what would have been a career-changing moment.

Sometime in the mid-Seventies she moved to Locke, an historic Chinese port town in the Delta behind a dike on the Sacramento River. A friend found her a small house that she bought for \$100. She was one of a dozen Caucasians among seventy or so Chinese and Filipino residents.

When I visited, most of her attentions were directed not to poetry, but to the immediate world of Locke. One Saturday afternoon we sat on a bench outside the small art gallery she managed on the one street into and out of Locke. She loved having visitors from the Bay Area. Just as she had been in Haight-Ashbury, she was keenly aware of local politics, and she served on the town's council. After a person walked by and was out of earshot, she reflected on their role in a local power battle: "That person is trying to sell his house to someone without the approval of the council." Laura would pull her lips into a slight snarl at the person's attempt to cheat. She carried a deep well of civic commitment. Every year the council would grant her use of a plot of land in which she carefully planted flower and vegetable gardens. Her earliest *Inheritance* poems about the gardens and Polish grandmothers of her childhood had found their reincarnation in the rich delta earth. By this time, she wasn't writing much, but what she did produce concerned the nearby river, the earth and the town, and was occasionally published in small local journals:

Say the river is quiet as sleeping frogs,
 These tiny frogs, tucked in the clefts
 Of leaves, they can sing like birds. I turn
 The earth upside down in my sureness of rain.

But you stand above on the slope detached
 In your past, without need, like bones. I do not
 Say I love you, at last, I do not love.
 I am here, barefooted, stepping on pears.

It was on the bench that we talked about her archive. Yes, occasionally she would have a visitor who wanted to talk about her life as a Beat: "I am not sure why they want to put it that way. True, I

knew and associated with many of the ones who became famous from their time in North Beach. They took and published a few of those poems. But I was not a Beat in that sense.”

“What are you going to do with your archive?” I asked. “Nothing. It is under the house in a box. Someone can find it after I am gone.” She shrugged her shoulders, as if nothing about the contents meant anything to her anymore.

In 2007 I learned of Laura’s death. I was able to make contact with Dona, her cousin in Detroit. She gave me permission to look for the archive and Laura’s will, if I happened to come across it. In a few days I found myself descending some rickety wooden stairs, onto a dirt floor. Sure enough, there was a heavy, leather-strapped trunk that I pulled upstairs. For all I knew a body could have been inside. The smell of mold was almost overwhelming. I opened all my car windows and put the trunk and some other recovered, wet boxes onto the floor and back seats. I drove back to San Francisco.

Gradually Laura’s history came back to life. She took good care of her years in London, right down to the terrible letter of rejection from Penguin. For the next three years I worked with student interns from California College of the Arts to assemble and process her correspondence, manuscripts (many unpublished), ephemera, and a drawing for one of her proposed gardens. What I found in that basement made it possible to assemble this volume.

Fortunately, Kevin Young, then director at Emory University’s Rose Library, acquired Laura’s archive, where it is now joined to the archives of Jack Gilbert and Linda Gregg. Laura, I suspect, would get a good laugh out of knowing her bedfellows. Some years later, during a visit to Locke, it was touching and lovely to find her acknowledged on a concrete wall in the community’s memorial garden: “Laura Ulewicz—Neighbor, Gardener, Poet.”

It may be the calling of every generation to figure out what to save and value from previous generations. Laura came so close to finding herself in the upper echelon of the poets of her time. Unfortunately, she arrived before the time when it would have been possible for a woman of her background to take center stage. In that, she was not alone among mid-twentieth century women

poets and artists. If anything I take it as my honor to have helped in the rescue of Laura's work and history. Now, again uncovered, may it find its way back into a contemporary dialogue, with we the living.

Stephen Vincent
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